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Teaching

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Winner of the NaNoWriMo Community Member Writing Contest

Teaching

Dru Richman

There are many types of yeshivas* in the world. For the most part they are populated by extremely talented students. And some are populated by truly exceptional students. *But what, pondered Rabbi Adam Tannenbaum, about the boys who would never be considered exceptional students or even merely talented? What's to become of them?*

It was there and then that he decided that he needed to open a yeshiva for students who had difficulty studying. Or who fidgeted in class. Or who had ADD. Or who had other learning differences. Jacob Goldbaum was one of those boys.

Rabbi Tannenbaum didn't know what to make of it. Jacob's older brother was a model of Torah learning. But no matter what Jacob did, he only seems to get further and further behind his fellow classmates. And so Jacob felt no small amount of trepidation when he was summoned to Rabbi Tannenbaum's (the "Rosh Yeshiva" — the Dean of the yeshiva) office one day just before sixth period. *This is it, he thought, they're probably going to expel me. Dad will be furious!*

Jacob was ushered in and sat in the big chair across from the Rabbi. The Rabbi looked at the smallish 15-year-old across the desk from him and said, "Jacob,

* a Jewish institution that focuses on the study of traditional religious texts, primarily the Torah and the Talmud (the Oral Law).

I see from your teacher's reports that you seem to be having trouble keeping up with your fellow students in your Talmud class."

Jacob was about to explain when the Rabbi held up his hand and continued. "You know," he said somewhat conspiratorially, "When I was a boy your age, I also had trouble with my Talmud studies."

"You?" said Jacob incredulously. The Rabbi beckoned him to lean in over the desk.

Shaking his head the Rabbi said, "I was not such a good student either. In fact, I almost failed my first Talmud class. If it weren't for another student helping me, I would have failed miserably."

Jacob wondered how that could be; the Rabbi was a great Talmud scholar.

"Tell you what," said the Rabbi, "I am needing a study partner and maybe we could help each other learn some Talmud. Whatdaya say?"

Jacob was stunned. *Me ... study with the Rabbi?* He took a deep breath and nodded, yes!

"That's wonderful," said the Rabbi. "What shall we study? How about something that none of the other boys are working on?" The Rabbi leaned back in his large chair and thought for a second and then a knowing smile crossed his lips and he almost imperceptibly shook his head yes. "How about we study ... 'Chullin'?"

Jacob looked up with a horrified look in his eyes. *Chullin* was one of the hardest books in all of the Talmud. It deals with how to properly slaughter animals to make sure they're fit to eat and a multitude of other laws relating to keeping kosher. Certainly not for the faint of heart. *And not*, thought Jacob, *for someone like me*. But before he could object, the Rabbi gave him some "homework."

"Let's start," said Rabbi Tannenbaum, "with every other day for one hour and we'll see how that works. For Wednesday, I want you to memorize the first line, and only the first line, of

the Mishna* and be prepared to answer questions about it. And I want you to make up some questions for me, too. And in this way, we'll study." While he was speaking, he was also writing on a small pad, which he tore off a sheet and handed to Jacob. "Here's a hall pass to get you back into class. See you Wednesday."

Stunned, Jacob could only take the paper and leave the Rabbi's office.

When they met on Wednesday, Jacob recited the first line of the text. And the Rabbi asked him questions. Which prompted him to ask the Rabbi questions. Which begot more questions. When the Rabbi announced that they were done for the day, Jacob was amazed to see that an hour had already passed.

"Your homework for Friday is to memorize the second line, and only the second line, of this Mishna," said the Rabbi. "And just like today, I'll ask you questions and you can ask me questions too." As Jacob stood to go, the Rabbi told him that he had done well on the first line ... but it would get harder after that. He smiled and told him to have a good day.

* The Mishnah teaches the oral traditions by example, presenting actual cases being brought to judgment.

On Friday, the Rabbi asked Jacob to repeat not only the second line, but also the first. And when the Rabbi asked questions about this point or another, Jacob (with, in some cases, the Rabbi's guidance) found the answers and the reasons behind the answers.

And so it went. First a few lines. Then a paragraph. And in a short time, Jacob had memorized a half a page. Then a full page. Then a second ... and a third. And by then, he had memorized seven full pages! And all the while, Rabbi Tannenbaum quizzed him at every opportunity. And just to show the Rabbi he

understood what he was memorizing, he hurled some terrific questions at the Rabbi. And all the while the Rabbi praised him for his devotion to Talmud and his understanding of the text.

Several months later, the yeshiva received an invitation from one of its former students that he was getting married and all the Rabbis, teachers, and students were invited to the ceremony and the reception.

While glancing out over the sea of dancing students and rabbis, Rabbi Tannenbaum spotted his longtime friend Rabbi Maury Burger, who was the Rosh Yeshiva for one of the most prestigious yeshivas in the country. They shook hands and retired to the side of the reception hall. After some chitchat, Rabbi Berger asked, "So I haven't seen you in a while, Adam. What have you been up to?"

"I started a yeshiva," said Rabbi T.

"Really? What kind of boys do you have?" asked Rabbi Burger.

"They're incredible. You would never believe such talent."

As he was speaking, he was scanning the room. In a moment, he spotted Jacob and summoned him over. Jacob was in awe as he was introduced to Rabbi Burger. Everyone had heard of Rabbi Berger. He was even a bigger Torah scholar than Rabbi Tannenbaum. *Oy!* thought Jacob.

"Jacob," said Rabbi Tannenbaum, "I told Rabbi Berger that we had the best Talmud students of any yeshiva anywhere. Let's give him an example, shall we?"

Jacob looked at his Rabbi with that deer-in-the-headlights look, while his insides were screaming for help. He looked around for someone, anyone, to come to his aid, but there was none to be had. He was trapped! And Rabbi Tannenbaum was talking again.

"Let's do something a bit tough," he paused as if to think. "How about ... Chullin? Why don't you recite it for us?"

Cattails in the Wind

Sherry Scamardo



Jacob looked at the Rabbi with the fear in his eyes of a condemned man. But he took a deep breath and began repeating from memory what he had learned. After about half a page, those that stood closest to Jacob stopped talking and began to listen. By the time he had gotten to the second page, there was a circle some 20 feet wide listening. And by the time he got to the fourth page, the entire room, even the band, had stopped whatever they were doing and were listening with rapt attention to Jacob's recital. You could have heard a pin drop.

Jacob repeated, word-for-word, every line. And as he got to the bottom of the seventh page, Rabbi Tannenbaum stepped in, put a hand on Jacob's shoulder and said, "I think that's enough Jacob. Thank you." Jacob breathed a sigh of relief. And the room spontaneously erupted in a cacophony of cheers and whistles and applause at the amazing feat that Jacob had done.

"That's the kind of boys we have!" said Rabbi Tannenbaum proudly.

I will never forget that moment and how it made me feel.

Even now, twenty years later, as I, *Rabbi Jacob Goldbaum*, sit at my desk as Rosh Yeshiva of the very school I studied in. It brings a smile to my face as I sit staring at a very scared Noach Rotensky.

"Noach, I see from your teacher's reports that you seem to be having trouble keeping up with your fellow students in your Talmud class.

"You know, when I was a boy your age I also had trouble with my Talmud studies. I was not such a good student either. In fact I almost failed my first Talmud class. If it weren't for another student helping me, I would have failed miserably. How 'bout we study together? Whatdaya say?"

Epilogue —

"If they can't learn the way we teach, we must teach the way they learn." — *Ole Ivar Lovaas*

Father and Son Picnic

Olivia Olson

